

From: Mathieu Gagne
To: Microsoft ATR
Date: 1/24/02 10:16pm
Subject: Microsoft Settlement is Wrong

To Whom this may concern:

I wish to express my fear that the proposed settlement with Microsoft goes against the public interest. For many decades now the process of software development has been best understood in terms of "task subdivision": take one big task, subdivide it into multiple smaller tasks, and have each of those tasks communicate with one another through well-defined and well-known "interfaces". That these interfaces be public is critical, as it allows the greater number of programmers (like myself) to reuse existing technology to improve products. Thus progress is made.

Microsoft is exercising its monopolistic powers to hide a number of previously well-known "great interfaces":

- the interface between the operating system and the browser (Internet Explorer);
- the interface between the operating system and hardware drivers (proprietary deals with particular hardware vendors);
- the interface between a document and a program that can process this document (the proprietary nature of all of Microsoft Office document formats);
- the interface between a web server and a web browser (proprietary extensions to web standards like HTML); etc.

From a technological standpoint, hiding these interfaces can only be detrimental to the public. It slows down software progress. In extreme cases, it also opens the door for egregious and terrifying security abuses, the existence of which is hotly debated but ultimately impossible to deny.

Paradoxically, Microsoft is one of the biggest proponents of the notion of "open interfaces" in the software industry, as a quick glance at the computer section of any bookstore will reveal by the wealth of books dedicated to COM and MFC. All these books, many of which are published by Microsoft Press, essentially proclaim the same truth: "open up your interfaces, and everyone will profit: you, the public, and Microsoft". This is true, and good. They can only be commended for this achievement.

However, these COM and MFC interfaces are of a much lesser realm than the "great interfaces" above. The latter, Microsoft has decided, should in fact be closed and hidden in order to lock the consumer into buying its products. That the progress of software development suffers is immaterial to them.

The proposed settlement agreement does nothing to remedy the hiding of the "great interfaces". Undoubtedly, these interfaces are documented within Microsoft proper. Breaking up Microsoft, as has been proposed in the past, is one self-evident way of exposing the interfaces, the most viable solution in the long term. At the very least, any settlement with them should force the disclosure of all these interfaces.

Otherwise, Microsoft's monopoly will continue to hurt the development of new software technology and to threaten the security and reliability of computers everywhere.

Best,

Mathieu Gagne.